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Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-0517

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Mrs. Donna Teresa
21113 Country Park Road
Salinas, California 93908

Dear Donna:

I recently read your Community Column regarding a veterans' cemetery at Fort Ord and it is with pride that I signed your petition.

I share your frustration that our efforts at the state and federal levels of government to establish a cemetery have not been successful. I will attempt to lay out all of the options I have pursued from the federal level and where roadblocks have cropped up.

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has two options to establish a veterans' cemetery – through the National Cemetery Program or through the State Cemetery Program. The National Cemetery Program has two very strict eligibility requirements: an area must be inhabited by at least 170,000 veterans within a 70 mile radius, and be farther than 75 miles from another National Cemetery. Unfortunately the VA has repeatedly concluded that Fort Ord meets neither of these criteria. According to the VA, approximately 50,000 veterans live in the tri-County area and we are within 75 miles, as measured in a straight line, to the San Joaquin Valley National Cemetery.

I have explored the possibility of designating the Fort Ord site as an annex of an existing National Cemetery, either the Golden Gate National Cemetery in San Francisco or the San Joaquin Valley National Cemetery. Creating an annex is used as a means to keep a currently open cemetery from closing. Since the Golden Gate National Cemetery in San Francisco is closed to burials, it cannot be annexed. The San Joaquin National Cemetery, on the other hand, will be open for burials for at least another twenty years, so it is not an option for annexation because the VA will only consider an annex if the adjacent cemetery is at full capacity. Another requirement of annexation is geographical proximity to share resources and staff and for this reason, Fort Ord can not be considered as an annex site.

The remaining option is the State Cemetery Program. For this program, the state of California would have to apply for a State Cemetery Grant. Upon approval of this grant, federal funds would pay to construct the cemetery and the state becomes responsible for funding the annual operations and maintenance costs.

Thus, the State Cemetery Program is the only way to create a cemetery at Fort Ord. To this end, I have directed the VA to work with the state of California as soon as the state applies for a grant to establish a State Veterans cemetery at Fort Ord. Although I have lobbied both former Governor Davis and current Governor Schwarzenegger and his Secretary of Veterans Affairs, the State has refused to incur the annual operations and maintenance expense for a cemetery.

An earlier state estimate for initial construction costs of a full build out of all 156 acres that have been dedicated for a cemetery at Fort Ord was approximately \$5.6 million. The estimated cost of maintaining

the cemetery ranges from the VA's estimate of about \$200,000 per year for partial build out to the state's estimate of about \$500,000 per year for full build out.

As the state is unwilling to commit to the financial obligation, I have recently floated the concept of tapping into excess revenue accumulated through development fees at Fort Ord Reuse Authority (FOR A) to fund the operations and maintenance costs of a cemetery. It would require the state to enter into a formal relationship with FOR A and be the applicant for a federal construction grant. This concept will require the cooperation of FORA and the State, and approval by the State legislature. That is why your petition remains vital to the cause, and I encourage your efforts.

In the meantime, I have raised and will continue to raise the issue of establishing a cemetery at Fort Ord with everyone who will listen! Most recently, I communicated with the California Veterans Board, who expressed its support for a veterans' cemetery at Fort Ord. Last year, I attended the Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials meeting, which advises the Department of Veterans Affairs. They too are supportive of establishing a veterans' cemetery at Fort Ord. The United Veterans Council also supports the establishment of a cemetery and has praised my efforts on behalf of this goal.

I have also raised this issue with the appropriate federal officials through my position on the House Appropriations Military Quality of Life Subcommittee. In February 2004, I invited the VA Undersecretary for Memorial Affairs, General John Nicholson, to tour the proposed cemetery site. The General and I also held a town hall meeting in Monterey to detail the National and State Cemetery programs to the community.

Furthermore, when then VA Secretary James Nicholson testified in front of the Subcommittee I questioned him on the VA's reluctance to consider the Fort Ord site for a veterans' cemetery. The Secretary responded by saying that the VA would take a look at it. To follow up on this statement, I inserted language in this year's Military Quality of Life and Veterans Appropriations bill directing the VA to examine the situation at Fort Ord and report back on what is necessary for the Department to establish a cemetery at Fort Ord. This report from the VA will establish in writing what the roadblocks are for creating a Cemetery at Fort Ord and therefore give us a future directive to knock down those roadblocks.

I remain optimistic that the Fort Ord State Veterans' Cemetery will be established in our lifetime. Again, I appreciate your attention to this matter. Please do not hesitate to be in contact with me about this issue.

Sincerely,



SAM FARR
Member of Congress

Thank you - good work.